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What does Washington know of POW mission?

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The sudden glare of publicity surrounding former Green Beret Lt. Col. James (Bo) Gritz' apparent incursions into Laos, in a privately backed search for American prisoners of war, has raised Watergate-style questions about what the government knew and when it knew it.

It has also rekindled debate on the underlying issue: whether US servicemen from the Vietnam war are still alive and being held against their will.

On the latter point, the Pentagon has declared dead all but two of the 2494 Americans unaccounted for. But families of the missing, various POW-MIA organizations, retired military men and others contend that the available evidence suggests significant numbers of Americans are still alive in Southeast Asia.

They point primarily to the 480 reports of first-hand sightings (many of them buttressed by lie-detector tests) of American prisoners in specific locations since the fall of Saigon in 1975. The Pentagon admits it "can't rule out the possibility there are Americans still over there."

But since the official repatriation of the POWs in 1973, getting a full accounting of the missing has not been high on Washington's agenda. Families and other POW activists accuse officials of foot-dragging and sweeping the problem under the rug in favor of a view that relations with the new communist order in the region must be forged.

Nonetheless, POW families and their allies are beginning to become a political force. On Jan. 28, while sources said Gritz, two other Americans and an escort team of Free Lao guerrillas were on their third foray inside Laos since November, President Ronald Reagan addressed the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia and said government intelligence was "fully focused" on the MIAs. Obtaining a full accounting of the missing, he said, had the "highest national priority" and he pledged to take "decisive action on any live sighting reports that can be confirmed."

Though the government officially condemns private forays as "unhelpful" to official efforts, it is evident that official Washington has had considerable contact with the 44-year-old Gritz (pronounced

Grighs) since 1979, when he retired early from the Army to launch a series of POW intelligence-gathering missions or, now, rescue attempts. During that time, Gritz has sought to weave a subtle link between the Pentagon, the private sector and the shadowy world of Southeast Asian covert operatives. He is currently on his third, so-far fruitless POW project, but not fo

Access to intelligence

Besides sighting reports, Gritz has access to top-secret US intelligence. Acting on this data — some of which has been examined by The Globe — Gritz convened a team of ex-Green Berets in Florida in February 1981 to train for a mission to Laos, but the project collapsed for lack of funds.

In November 1981, a Gritz team of four retired Green Berets dispatched two groups of Laotian resistance soldiers from Thailand into Laos on a reconnaissance mission. The Lao soldiers were made available to Gritz by Vang Pao, a former Lao major general who, at the height of US involvement in Southeast Asia, commanded some 40,000 anticommunist tribesmen as a secret army for the CIA. The Gritz-Vang Pao link was facilitated by then-California Rep. Robert Dornan, a conservative Republican from the Los Angeles area, who also arranged for Gritz to discuss his mission with Bobby Ray Inman, then deputy CIA director.

According to Malden private detective Vincent Arnone, an ex-Green Beret who participated in both the second and current Gritz operations, the reconnaissance teams returned to Thailand with no photo evidence of live POWs. But he claimed the forays did produce live sightings and locations of camps.

Reagan himself has been placed on the defensive by reports that actor Clint Eastwood, who contributed at least \$30,000 toward the current Gritz mission, informed the President of the operation in advance

and urged him to support it. White House and Pentagon officials say they tried to get word to Gritz through intermediaries that he should not proceed. Gritz associates contend, however, that the word from Washington was encouraging, not discouraging.

Whatever the extent of Gritz' support from Washington, and whatever the wisdom of his high press profile, supporters argue he is a formidable soldier who would not undertake a fool's errand.

A heralded Vietnam war hero cited as the model US soldier by retired Gen. William Westmoreland in his autobiography, Gritz holds a master's degree in communications from American University, speaks Swahili and Chinese, is a marathon runner and a karate black belt. He served as commander of the Special Forces battalion in Panama before assuming a post as chief of congressional relations for the Pentagon's Defense Security Assistance Agency, which oversees US military assistance programs overseas.

A copy of a 4000-word document made available to The Globe entitled "Intelligence Summary and Situation Report: Operation Lazarus" — the blueprint for Gritz' current mission — helps shed some light on